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ABSTRACT

The true stories in this collection are based on the employment experiences of four people. Some of the stories were written in the context of their participation in the LaSalle Adult Learning Project. Some come from interviews that were then transcribed and edited into a form that could most easily be shared with other adult learners. A number of themes around employment and unemployment run through the variety of experiences recounted by the four people. Each remembers moments in his or her personal history when being out of work was a positive step toward something better. Issues of self-respect and personal development are raised: questions of what it means to pick up roots in the course of seeking employment; to say no to a dangerous or disrespectful work situation; to take more responsibility on the job; to work for oneself. Stories are illustrated with photographs. (KC)

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ABOUT OUR JOBS

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ABOUT OUR JOBS

By

Joseph Caesar
Lossie Conyers
Mildred Cross
Abdul Wadood Muhammad

Pictures by Linda G. Johnson

Facilitating and editing by
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Foreword . . .

The stories in this collection are based on the employment experiences of four people: Joseph Caesar, Lossie Conyers, Mildred Cross, and Abdul Wadood Muhammad. Some of the stories were written in the context of their participation in the LaSalle Adult Learning Project. Some come from interviews which were then transcribed and edited into a form that could most easily be shared with other adult learners.

A number of themes around employment and unemployment can be observed through the variety of experiences recounted by Joe, Lossie, Mildred and Abdul. Each remembers moments in his or her personal history when being out of work was a positive step toward something better. Issues of self-respect and personal develoment are raised: questions of what it means to pick up roots in the course of seeking employment; to say no to a dangerous or disrespectful work situation; to take more responsibility on the job; to work for one's self. They are questions that run much deeper than typical "text book" employment issues such as the importance of being on time, of having a "positive" attitude, or of dressing appropriately.

It is our hope that these stories and photographs can be useful to other communities of adult learners. They may provide enjoyable leisure reading. But instructors may also wish to use the materials to help raise issues of importance to their students. Perhaps these accounts can stimulate other adult learners to share and discuss some of their own experiences, opinions and concerns.

A final note of appreciation for the wisdom and generosity of Joe, Lossie, Mildred and Abdul. Their courage, humor, and intelligence inspires those of us who have been fortunate to work and study with them. I know that each has influenced and enriched my own life. Hopefully, through this collection, they can touch others as well.

Thanks, too, to Linda Johnson, who took the photos, and to Lutheran Church Women for helping us with editing, production and printing. Linda teaches photography at Temple and has been a freelance photographer for eight years. Lutheran Church Women has helped us with several similar projects as part of its commitment to adult literacy and adult basic education.

Azi Ellowitch

October, 1987

Washroom Technician

By Joseph Caesar

I once worked in the laundry of a hospital. There were three of us on that job. They called us "Washroom Technicians." That was our classification.

There was a laundry chute in this hospital that went all the way up to the fifth floor. When you opened the door, the clothes would come out like a bullet. The room was not that large. When the clothes came out, they filled the room. You needed to be by the door so that you could get out of there. All kinds of clothes would come through that chute. The smell was bad.

It was the kind of job that made you want to drink. Sometimes we would get into trouble for drinking. But we didn't care. It was the only way we could stand it. I worked there for about two years. I had had some problems with my heart. I had a heart attack while working there. It took too much out of me. After that, I was happy to be unemployed.

Something Worth Doing

By Joseph Caesar

At the laundry in the hospital where I worked,
I couldn't move up.
The supervisor had to read
and I couldn't read.
And the work I was doing was too much
because I had a bad heart.
Then I was out of work for over five years.
But even before that,
I had all these little jobs.
I would get them,
but I would get sick and have to leave.
I couldn't get a desk job
because I couldn't read.

After a while, it had been so long
and I was feeling closed in,

closed up in the house.
Coming to class helped me
feel more confident.
Being around people, strangers,
helped me break out of my shell.

But I never gave up.
I just kept hoping and looking for the best.
I knew that something was bound to change;
something was bound to happen.
But I had to make an effort.
I couldn't sit down
and wait for something to come to me.
I see a lot of guys now.
They aren't making any kind of effort.
They're not going any place.
You have to make an effort.
You have to do something.
So I just kept telling myself, "Do something.
Oh, Lord, let me do something, instead of nothing.
And something worth doing.
Give me the satisfaction of doing something
that is going to benefit somebody else.
Not taking advantage.
Just benefiting something,
somebody other than myself."

Driving a Schoolbus

By Joseph Caesar

In the morning, I come in and get the bus.
I clean the windows, sweep it out, crank it up,
walk around, check the bus outside, check the lights.
Then I write up my log.
I have to write in the time, the mileage, my name,
the route, and the bus number.
I fill out two logs.
One goes to the Board of Education;
the other goes to the company.
Then I'm ready to go.
I have three schools to pick up every morning
and four schools to drop off.

I have 36 kids at a time.
I try to make the kids understand that I am the bus driver
and their lives are in my hands.

I'm still learning.
I don't want to get mad.

I don't want to be constantly hollering at them.
I feel there's no need.
I should only have to tell them things once
but I have to tell them about four or five times.
They should know and they do know.
They just need to be reminded. Constantly.
Sometimes the bigger ones pick on the little ones.
And the little ones don't want to give up
so they keep fighting. Then I have to break them up.
The afternoon is murder.
They come out of school hyper.
Then I have these wild kids in back of me,
and the nuts in the cars in front.

We've got rules to abide by because,
like the book says,
we have an influence on them.
These kids will go through years
watching how we act on the bus.
Our driving habits are going to help them obey the law more.
The book tells you all that.
The driving book.

More Responsibility, More Stress

By Joseph Caesar

When I was young,
I drove a garbage truck, a dump truck.
You had a route,
but you didn't have to read or write.
The supervisor did everything.
The only responsibility you had
was to yourself and that truck.

But, as a schoolbus driver, I'm responsible
for the bus and anything that happens on it.
I'm dealing with a lot of things
other than just sitting up there driving.
There's a lot of stress.

I'm more on my own.
I don't have any boss looking at me.
I'm on my own out there.
Me and the children.
In this job, you have responsibility over lives.
That's why a lot of guys don't stay.
A lot of guys go and quit every day.

The Backbone of the Family

By Lossie Conyers

My dad left home when
I was ten,
so I went to work
in the fields.
My mother had been young
when my father left,
and we didn't have
any support.
They didn't have welfare
like they do now.
So my mother would get
involved with men
who would be able
to help us,
help buy food.

My brother and I were the
ones who worked.
White people would get us to do jobs.
They would pay us.
They were probably cheating us, too,
because we were children.
But all we cared about
was that we were making some money.

My grandmother was over 300 pounds, and she was short.
She couldn't do much,
but take care of the house, washing and ironing.
My brother and I would go out
and we would do hard work. We were like the backbone
of the family.
We would go out and do jobs and get paid
so we could buy food.

Planting and Harvesting---Not Reading and Writing

By Lossie Conyers

**The boss man, a white man,
would come and get me out of school.
In the spring and early summer,
we would be planting, mostly tobacco.
Planting tobacco was horrible work.
We had to get up early in the morning
when there was still dew or frost on the ground.
We had to pull up the tobacco plants
that had been grown in beds
and plant them, set them, in the field.
We used a hand tool, a tobacco setter.**

**In the late summer and fall, we would be harvesting--
harvesting corn, picking cotton, shaking peanuts.
By the time all that was done,**

**it would be closer to December.
Then sometimes even in the winter I didn't go to school
because I didn't have shoes.**

**After we had harvested the corn,
we would go back and gather the scrap.
Some people would sell the scrap corn they got.
We would have ours ground for corn meal.
That's how we ate. The corn meal we got would last
all winter.
We'd make corn bread, mixing it with water, and
frying it on the griddle with some grease from the hogs
that had been killed. We'd eat it with molasses.**

A Ticket to New York

By Lossie Conyers

**I was married when I was fifteen.
I thought that, being married, I'd have somebody
to take care of me.
But my marriage didn't turn out to be
what I thought it would be.**

**I had this dream of living happily ever after
with this beautiful husband and two children.
I got the beautiful husband. Then I had my first baby.
She was born into this world with long, silky hair.
Beautiful. Then I had a son.
Meantime, my husband was running around.
Then after that came another daughter and another
daughter.
Babies just kept coming.**

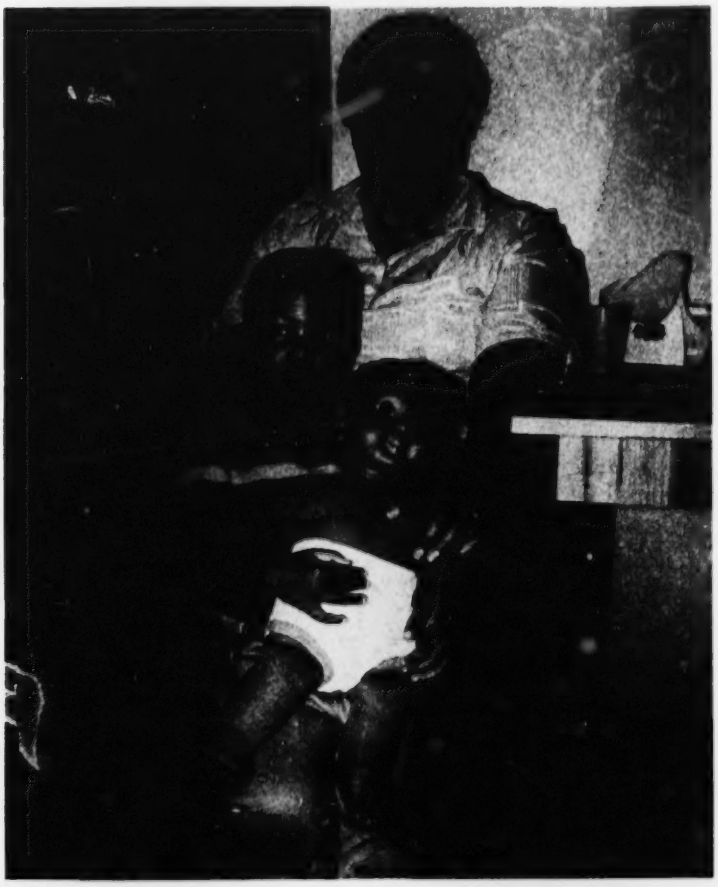
**My husband and I kept separating and going back together.
I kept thinking that maybe we could make it.
But every time we would get back together,
the only thing I would do was get pregnant again.
Then I would go through a whole lot of trouble.
I would have to leave again, go back home to my mother.
Having another baby.
I just got tired of that.**

**Then I saw an ad in the paper about maids
coming to New York. The ad said that if you wanted to come,
they would send you a ticket.
I wanted to do something to take care of my children.
I had started to become just like my mother--
trying to keep a friend who could help me out,
and, you know, nine times out of ten, the friend
didn't have anything himself.
He would go off and do things, trying to survive.**

**So my mother told me to go ahead,
and she would look after the children for me.
So I sent for a ticket. That was in 1956.**

**They took us to this agency, where people would
come and pick out the girl they wanted.
Then they would take us home. We would sleep in.
I was taken to Long Island.
I wasn't making but $35 a week.
Maids now make more in a day than we made in a week.**

**At first, I had a couple of bad deals.
One woman wanted me to scrub the floor on my knees.
I refused. I knew that I could take a mop
and make a floor look just as good.
I lost my job because of that.**



I walked out with no place to go.
I had my clothes in a shopping bag.
My shopping bag was torn and my clothes falling out.
I didn't have any money.

I had met this girl on the bus
coming up from the South
who gave me her number.
She said to come and see her sometime.
I called her.

A woman answered and said,
"Well, Lucille doesn't live here,
but we babysit her little daughter."
I told them my situation.
They said, "Honey, you come in."

There I was. Didn't know how to read or write,
but a little bit.
Never had been to the big city by myself.
And they're giving me these directions:
Get this subway. Get off at this stop.
Catch this bus and get off
at a certain stop.
So I travelled to Brooklyn.
And it was frightening.
At that time, the gangs,
they were blowing one another's heads off,
cutting one another's tongues out.
All that stuff.
But, somehow, I got off at the right stop.
I asked somebody where to find the address,
and they told me, "Right up the block."

I smelled food being cooked at a restaurant
and it smelled so good.
But I didn't have any money.

Then I arrived.
There were two ladies. Twins.
They were the best people
I have ever met in my life. They didn't know one thing about me.
But when I explained who I was,
they invited me to come on in.
They ran a bath, gave me some clean clothes.
They sent out to a restaurant
so I would have dinner ready
when I had finished my bath.
They had my bed all made up, nice and clean,
like a hospital bed.
I had never slept in a bed like that before.
Down South, my grandmother had made sheets
out of white bags.

I didn't know what to think of this nice, clean,
made-up bed, top sheet, bottom sheet.
This was like heaven to me.
So I lay down on it, went to sleep,
and had a nice sleep.

The next morning, I woke up
to eggs, bacon, grits, and coffee.
They had my breakfast all made.
People I'd never seen before.
To me this was strange,
because nobody had ever treated me like this.
All my life I had felt mistreated and abused.
It had always seemed like nobody cared
or knew how to treat me.

Since then other people have been nice to me too.
But I can't classify those two ladies
with anybody I've ever met.

Working in Westport

By Lossie Conyers

I worked for a couple of years
in Westport, Connecticut; sleeping in.
I worked for the people who owned the cleaners.
Nice people.
I always was a good housekeeper.

Usually you have Sundays and Thursdays off.
But I got them to give me my two days together.
Fridays and Saturdays and every other Sunday.

And I always went into Brooklyn.
The first time I was late coming back,
and she got upset.
She said, "How will you finish all this work?
It's piled up. You're late."

I said, "Look, it's my job; I'll do it.
I know how to do it."

I guess she had some place to go.
When she came back, her house was sparkling clean.
She couldn't believe the work that I had done.
I don't care how late I came there,
I could clean that house
as if I had been there all along.

So she got to a place where she didn't say anything
about how I did my work.
She just let me do it,
because she knew I knew what I was doing.
Then there wasn't any problem.

What is "Work"?

By Lossie Conyers

**I think that work can
consist of
a number of things.
Since I've had my
grandson David,
I work hard trying to
do right by him.
For the time that
I have him,
I'm trying to keep his
mind together.
I don't want him to
be mixed up
because of the situation
with his mother.
It's a hard situation
for him.
Wanting to be with her,
wanting me,
being with me.
And then sooner or later
she'll come
and take him back with her.
I want to try to keep him on a level
that maybe he can deal with this
without his mind being confused and destroyed.
That's a job. That's a real job.
Trying to discipline him at home in the right way.
Trying to comprehend within my mind
the right thing to do.**

Dangerous Work (But Plenty of It)

By Abdul Wadood Muhammad

**I started working in a machine shop
when I was 17 years old. That was in 1962,
when work was a lot easier to find.
There were so many factories.
You just went
into one and you
could get a job.**

**At first I worked
on a machine
that made nails.
Then I graduated
to a press,
a punch press.
A punch press
punches holes
and forms the
metal at the same time.
The punch press was a more dangerous machine
than the one I had started working on.
One place where I worked had presses
15 feet high and 12 feet wide
and weighing twenty-five tons.
They needed to have that much weight
to bend stainless steel
that would be used for metal file cabinets
and other office furniture.**

**There were times when you had to put
your whole hand in it.
Sometimes you had to put your whole arm in it.
I saw people lose fingers.
I saw people lose hands.
It could happen in a second.**

"No! This is It!"

By Abdul Wadood Muhammad

At the last place where I worked as a press operator,
I was shop steward for a while.
By being in that position, I started seeing
how people were being treated.
Everybody was selling everybody out.
And the union was in cahoots, hand in glove.
I found out that most of the men who had worked there for
20 years and 30 years were making
the same amount of money as I was making after 5.
When the contract ran out, the workers there
would get raises like 2 cents an hour.
The company would always threaten to leave
if the union didn't take a cut.

Most of the workers had come from the South.
They had very little education.
They had families, and they were in debt.
As they got older, past 45,
they felt like where could they go?
They just wanted to work there until age 62.
Then they could get their social security.
No pension. Just a social security check.
I saw myself in that situation.
And I said, "This is me.
This is all I've got to work for."

I got to the point where physically I would get up
at the same time each morning.
But, mentally, I couldn't get out the door.
That went on for a whole week.
Then, one day, something inside me said,
"No! This is it!"

I Decided to Work for Myself

By Abdul Wadood Muhammad

I realized that a man can never be free
As long as he works for somebody else.
How can I know what my capabilities are
if I am always dependent on someone else
to fulfill my needs?

The factory owners were paying my rent.
I went to work on Monday and worked until Friday.
Then, when Friday came along,
they gave me a paycheck.
I became dependent on them.
And when somebody buys a house or a car
he cannot afford to get fired
or miss too many days on that job.
So he becomes a slave. He has to go to work.
There's no doubt about it.
And whatever the man asks of him,
he has to go along with it.
If the man say, "I want you to do this,"
and you refuse to do it,
he makes ways to get rid of you.
I saw hundreds of people get fired that way.

I didn't want to be in that kind of position.
So I decided to work for myself.

VENDING

By Abdul Wadood Muhammad

I like vending.

**I can be my
own boss.
I like going
down to the
wholesale
houses
where people
treat me like I'm
a human being.
I enjoy
looking around
and deciding what I want to sell.**

**I was raised in North Philadelphia.
I've lived here for 35 years.
I know a lot of people.
So when I'm standing on the corner,
I see people I haven't seen in twenty years.**

**The thing is to be consistent.
Just be there.
Some days I stay out there and I make $15.
The next day I make $45. Same corner.
Same time and everything.
But I always have a certain time when I start
and a certain time when I leave.
Whether I make it or I don't, I'm leaving.
I've got something else to do.
But there's a freedom there.
Every day is up to you.
It's preparation for opportunity.
That's what I say.**

What I Want

By Abdul Wadood Muhammad

I don't want to be a rich capitalist.
I don't want a whole lot of money.
I just want to be able to pay my bills:
utility bills, telephone bill,
buy food, have some money in the bank.
Just to have a small rowhouse,
where my children can come and stay,
if they want to.
Maybe a used automobile
that can get me back and forth
where I want to go.
That's all.
I just want to make enough money
to take care of my family.
That's all I want.
No more, no less.

My First Job in the U.S.A.

By Mildred Cross

**I was living in England.
One of my friends had
visited the U.S.
She liked it and
suggested I give it a try.
I applied to immigration
in Great Britain
for a visiting visa,
and I got it.
I liked it in the U.S.,
and I stayed.**

**There were other
women here
from Jamaica
and I was introduced
to them.
I had talked to one
of those women
on the phone
before I left England.
So when I came, I already had a room.
The first day I was here, another woman came
and took me out to lunch.
The next day, she took me to an employment agency.
The day after that, I began working for them.**

**It was a live-in job for an old person
who was not capable of taking care of herself.
I was to stay with her, prepare her meals.
I would get three meals a day plus wages. Every two weeks,
I would be off for two days.
Someone else would come in to relieve me.**

"Treat Me Fairly or I Don't Stay"

By Mildred Cross

**One lady I took care of didn't treat me fairly
so I left her.
She was supposed to feed me, and she didn't.
She told me to use my own food,
my own bed linen.
I couldn't drink out of her cups or her glasses,
because they were crystal and for her visitors.**

**So I took my own cup, my own glass,
my own sheets, my own food.
When I made telephone calls,
I would have to pay for them.
I couldn't watch the television
when she was watching it.
I couldn't use the radio.
So I took my own radio.
But she still quarreled with me.**

**When I was in my bedroom and she in hers,
I would turn the radio down low,
but she would say it was disturbing her.
I finally just called the agency.
I told them I wasn't staying
and I left.
If I think that the person
is not treating me fairly,
I don't stay.**

Dealing with Employment Agencies

By Mildred Cross

**There are good agencies in this country,
and there are bad ones.
Some take the money
that you have worked for.
But some agencies really help.**

**When I came here 13 years ago,
I made $22 a day.
Each time you got a job,
they charged you $2 a day for a year.
I was lucky.
I had one job that lasted 4 and a half years.**

**This year, I went to an
agency to get a job.
Day's work. $40 per
day, plus lunch.
The woman at the
agency said to me,
"The first week you
work, the money
is mine."
She was saying that if
you only work
for two days,
before you can buy
milk, that $80 is hers.
So, after two days,
I paid her the $80.**

**The lady I was
working for had
also paid them $80.**

**Then, when I was there, she received a letter from them
telling her that she could deduct
the money she owed the agency
from my pay.
But I had already paid the agency $80
and I said, "Oh, no.
I'm not going to pay her any more."
The lady I worked for agreed
that her fee shouldn't be taken from my salary.
I still do day work for her.**

**Someone sent me to another agency for day's work
a few years ago.
The job was paying $35 a day.
I had to pay the agency $70.
But this agency didn't tell me
that the first week's wages was theirs.
They said to pay them as I went along.
And if I were on a job for 5 years,
they would only get $70 from me.
If I only worked somewhere for three days
or two weeks, they wouldn't take anything
because it didn't work out.
They said that if you are there for 6 weeks or more,
then you have to pay the $70.**

**The nurse's aid work that I'm doing now
is with an agency that pays $55 a day, for 24 hours.
For a weekend, I get $110; they get $18.
But I don't pay the agency directly.
When the person pays me, I fill out a worksheet.
I give that person a portion of the worksheet.
It's like a receipt.
The person gives me my money
and sends the agency
its fee.**

The Raver

By Mildred Cross

**I've seen a lot.
I've seen good people;
I've seen bad people;
I've seen kind people;
I've seen mean people.**

**I was once taking care of this lady
and she had two daughters.
One of them raved all the time
about anything and everything.
So I called her "The Raver."**

**One day she went out and she bought some dietetic
cookies for her mom. She came home
telling her mother how much it was a pound.
And she said to me, "Mildred, don't you eat any.
They're too expensive."**

**I said "O.K."
Then when she left, I did help myself to those cookies.
And they were good!**

The Job I Didn't Get

By Mildred Cross

I once saw a job in the paper. There was no phone number but the address was in the paper. I got dressed and went there.

On arrival, I went in the office and this lady said, "May I help you?" I said, "Yes." I told her I saw the job in the paper and I came to apply for it. She said, "I am so sorry. It's gone."

I felt sad and hurt.